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FROM AMBASSADOR FOR DOD DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FATA
DEPARTMENT FOR EUR, EUR/SCE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [HR](#) [DEFENSE](#) [REFORM](#)

SUBJECT: FIXED-WING FIGHTERS: TIME TO ENGAGE CROATIANS ON
PROCUREMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Robert A. Bradtke for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Since my arrival just over a year ago, I have repeatedly stressed to GoC officials that, as a future NATO member, Croatia did not need to procure fixed-wing fighter aircraft. I, along with my DAO and ODC staff, have argued consistently that the GoC could rely on NATO partners for air policing and would be much wiser to invest in rotary wing and medium lift capabilities. The Croatians, however, have remained steadfast in their commitment to procure fighters and have publicly announced it as the next big procurement in their military modernization plans. Saab has already begun aggressively marketing the Swedish Gripen. I believe it is time to stop discouraging this procurement and begin educating the Croatians on the true costs and complexities of a fighter purchase in order to persuade them that, if they are going to buy fighters, then U.S. F-16s are the best choice for this air force.

WAR EXPERIENCE DRIVING FIXED-WING FIXATION

¶12. (C) Minister of Defense Berislav Roncevic has told me directly that the GoC cannot be talked out of fighter jets. Memories of the air raids the early 1990s are too fresh in Croatian minds, making this an emotional argument that defies fiscal logic. "My son," Roncevic told me, "will never have to use a bomb shelter." The Prime Minister and others have echoed this sentiment.

¶13. (C) While at one time we may have thought this procurement was driven only by senior air force officers looking to keep fast movers in their inventory, it is now clear to me that the decision to procure fighters has been made at the top levels of the GoC and is irreversible. While no formal tender has been issued, the military has begun actively studying fighter options, with new Gripens and refitted F-16s already named as the leading contenders.

TIME TO EDUCATE AND START MARKETING

¶14. (C) I propose that we begin extensive education immediately to make the Croatians smart customers. Our objective should be to make sure they set realistic timelines for this procurement and are aware of the true maintenance costs of fighter aircraft and their future impact on Croatia's defense budget. The Gripen vs. F-16 match-up is not a new one -- we learned valuable lessons in the F-16 sale to Poland and the Gripen sale in Hungary that should be

shared with the Croatians to guide their tender process.

¶ 15. (C) This month, credible press reports indicate that the GoC will choose a Finnish armored personnel carrier over one from the subsidiary of a U.S. manufacturer, at least in part due to the superior marketing efforts of the Finns. This has convinced me that we must engage now and engage assertively. Saab has already begun its Gripen marketing campaign to the Croatians, opening an office in Zagreb, providing detailed technical specifications for the Ministry of Defense's procurement study, touring military personnel and journalists through the factory, and effectively working the media. The US has done none of this. Saab is already seen in the hallways of the Defense Ministry as the more serious partner. We should move quickly to catch up in order to be competitive on this procurement.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS TRIP OFFERS ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY

¶ 16. (C) A distinguished visitors orientation tour (DVOT) to Washington and Tampa scheduled for September 10-20 provides a unique opportunity to engage top Croatian military officials on this issue. Participants include DCHOD LTG Baric, Air Force Cmdr BG Bagaric, Army Cmdr LTG Kruljac, J-4 BG Ostovic, and J-7 BG Matanovic. In addition, Air Force Cmdr BG Bagaric will attend an air commanders' conference in the US following the DVOT and may have several open days between these events.

An additional opportunity to engage GoC officials may also present itself at an Adriatic-3/Baltic-3 meeting of defense and foreign ministers in mid-October in Split, Croatia.

BRADTKE